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The Politics of England

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Abstract
Party political interest in the so-called 'English Question' has grown in recent years, due to the enmeshing of constitutional issues with a growing political and public affiliation with and expression of English national identity and culture. More recently, attention has shifted to the decentralisation of government within England. The 'English Question' is thus defined by two interconnected but distinctive 'English Questions'. This article will assess whether, in seeking to find answers for these 'English Questions', the Conservatives and Labour are establishing a more distinctive 'politics of England'. It will first consider the extent to which the politicisation of English identity and civic society have stimulated a more nationally framed political culture and party politics, and then assess whether constitutional reforms undertaken in Westminster, especially the introduction of EVEL, and regional devolution initiatives within England might facilitate greater party political engagement with an emergent 'politics of England'.

Keywords: Party politics, English Question, nationalism, regionalism, Labour, Conservatives

Introduction

THE SO-CALLED 'West Lothian Question', whose principal anomaly concerns voting asymmetries within the House of Commons, has proven a durable feature of British political debate since it was first posed by Labour MP Tam Dalyell in 1977. Interest in the unreciprocated voting rights of MPs from outside England on matters that affect only England has, however, intensified as powers have been progressively devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. The 'West Lothian Question' has also mutated into the 'English Question', this largely due to the enmeshing of constitutional issues with a growing political and public affiliation with and expression of English national identity and culture. More recently, attention has shifted somewhat to consider the decentralisation of government *within* England. The 'English Question' is thus defined by two interconnected but distinctive 'English Questions'.

It might be argued that successive 'new' Labour governments between 1997 and 2010 consciously peripheralised or even deliberately overlooked the national governmental arrangements of England during a period of radical reform of the constitutional architecture elsewhere in the United Kingdom (UK). Moreover, Labour appeared to intentionally prioritise Anglo-centric constructions of Britishness while negating the national identity of England as a political community. The party did not overlook England completely while in government, instead undertaking an extensive reorganisation of English local government through the 'modernisation' of its leadership structures, policy-making and public service delivery. Furthermore, it transformed English regional government, introducing Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to coordinate economic development and England's first city-region in London with its own directly elected mayor. Attempts by Labour to establish elected regional assemblies across England were, however, abandoned in 2004 after voters in the North-East of England referendum, energised by cynicism about creating a costly but largely ineffective new tier of governance which lacked significant regional powers, rejected the proposition.[1]

By comparison, the Conservatives displayed a greater preparedness to adopt more strident expositions of political Englishness prior to and during Labour's period in office,

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particularly under the party leadership of William Hague.[2] However, many leading figures within the party viewed the relegation of Conservative unionism as electorally damaging, and issues of English governance and identity only resonated intermittently. On becoming leader of the party in 2005, David Cameron quickly sought to distance himself from 'sour little Englanders' within the party, preferring instead to stress commitment to established forms of Anglo-British identity and parliamentary politics. This noted, the Conservatives' endorsement of 'English Votes for English Laws' (EVEL) was significant, as it allowed them to claim they alone were prepared to defend English interests in Westminster by restoring the UK's constitutional equilibrium.

The subsequent Coalition government's record in office in addressing the constitutional affairs of England was largely marked by procrastination. This was in part due to a lack of agreement between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats regarding the 'English Question', and also the political salience of the Scottish independence referendum. This constitutional torpor was, however, shrugged off during the final year of the Coalition government, with two radical constitutional reform initiatives by the Conservatives energising the 'politics of England'. First, in June 2014 Chancellor George Osborne outlined plans for extensive devolution of powers to 'city-regions' of combined local authorities across England. Then in September 2014, on the morning after the independence referendum vote had confirmed Scotland's continued place within the Union, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that the introduction of EVEL would provide 'a decisive answer' to the 'English Question' in Westminster.

This article will assess whether, in seeking to find answers for these 'English Questions', the Conservatives and Labour are establishing a more distinctive 'politics of England'. It will first consider the extent to which the politicisation of English identity and civic society have stimulated a more nationally orientated political culture and party politics. It will then assess whether constitutional reforms undertaken in Westminster, especially the introduction of EVEL, and regional devolution initiatives within England might facilitate greater party political engagement with an emergent 'politics of England'.

Towards a politics of England?

The proposition that England has emerged as a nascent but identifiable 'political community' has gained considerable traction over the past decade among academics, political parties and the media. Such claims have been founded on a growing body of research, particularly the series of Future of England (FoE) surveys, which indicate that English national identity has gradually superseded its British counterpart both in relative and absolute expressions of popular affiliation. Moreover, the FoE surveys show that English national identity has become increasingly politicised in its form and expression in response to a range of grievances about inequalities associated with devolution within the UK, the cost and terms of European Union (EU) membership and the scale and impact of immigration.[3]

Michael Kenny argues that this renewed sense of English national consciousness and civic nationhood has been energised by democratic frustrations associated with the governance of UK and a concurrent decline in deference to many of the core British institutions, such as the monarchy, the BBC and the NHS.[4] This has been accompanied by visible growth in the public celebration of English culture and identity. Politicians, academics, media commentators and campaign groups have also proved willing to publicly explore the historical foundations and contemporary dynamics of cultural and political Englishness in greater depth. Moreover, mainstream Union-wide political parties have displayed a new appetite to engage rhetorically with England as a distinct national political entity and design policies that appeal predominantly or exclusively to the English electorate.

However, the reported intensification of English identity does not—as yet—appear to have encouraged a more explicit 'politics of England'. Indeed, FoE surveys indicate that popular attachment with discrete forms of Englishness has fluctuated and even declined.[5] Furthermore, longitudinal studies undertaken as part of the British Social Attitudes survey, utilising different

methodologies to the FoE studies, indicate a broad stability and balance in public affiliation with English and British identities since 1999.[6] Moreover, the 'backlash' underpinning the politicisation of English identity is founded on concerns about defending a range of territorial interests which do not necessarily coalesce at a national level. For example, the vast majority of FoE respondents in 2012 agreed that the interests of London (79 per cent) and the South-East (62 per cent) received preferential treatment by government.

The relative size and diversity of England's population may in part explain the stunted politicisation of English identity when compared to the other national constituencies of the UK. According to Kenny, English nationhood appears to still lack sufficient cultural, territorial and historical purchase or agency to reach across entrenched socio-communal and geo-cultural divides, such as the 'north/south divide' and local or regional identities such as those in Yorkshire or Cornwall. Indeed, FoE survey evidence indicates that a nascent English national political community is fractured by localities and regions which offer citizens in England alternative forms of citizenship and identity.[7] Furthermore, England's citizens, particularly those from ethnic minority communities, continue to perceive English national identity as conservative and ethnicised when compared to allegedly more liberal and civically minded nationalisms in other parts of the UK and also progressive constructions of post-imperial Britishness.

Explanations for the politicisation of English identity, or lack thereof, go beyond issues of identity, though. Central to England's failure to emerge as a distinct political community has been the lack of an explicit civic relationship between English citizens and a definitively English national legislature and government. The absence of separate national political institutions, such as an English national parliament and civil service, has stunted not only the politicisation of English national identity but also the national framing of citizenship. This has stymied the solidification of English civic nationalism, particularly as policy-making and political debate concerning England continues to be conducted within the UK parliament.

The absence of an identifiably English national political culture extends to the organisation of civil society in England. A significant number of non-governmental organisations, charities, cultural institutions and other civil society actors, particularly those based in London, continue to function within (often conflated and unspoken) English and British remits. Unlike Scotland and Wales, England does not have its own national television news or newspapers, but does have a rich variety of local and regional alternatives. Moreover, there is no English national museum, theatre and gallery. Devolution has increasingly reframed civil societies in Scotland and Wales, but not England, in explicitly national rather than multinational terms. Organisations such as the Fabian Society or the Electoral Reform Society have Scottish and Welsh but not English national branches. Other actors signal their Anglocentric orientation through their organisational structures. For example, the Institute for Public Policy Research has a London office but also branches in 'the North' and Scotland.

The absence of distinctively English national political and civil society architecture has also deterred the demand or necessity for a nationally orientated English party politics. Unlike in Scotland and Wales, none of the Union-wide mainstream parties have English national wings which are separate from the UK-level party. This has meant that the roles of the UK and English party leadership overlap, and party policies continue to be mainly framed in British rather than English contexts, even if they relate exclusively to England. Similarly, while English politicians have proven increasingly prepared to voice anxieties about the constitutional future of England and the need to celebrate English national culture and identity more readily, few have been willing to explicitly reject the Anglo-British framing of their party's political identity. Even the campaign for the UK to remain a member of the EU was nationally framed in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales but titled 'Britain: Stronger in Europe' in England.

The politicisation of English national identity has also been limited by the absence of a popular and electorally successful English nationalist party. The impact

and resonance of secessionist nationalist parties have re-orientated the political identities of the main unionist parties competing in Scotland and Wales by reshaping electoral competition and parliamentary politics. This has encouraged greater policy dissonance within unionist parties, reflecting divergence in how citizenship is framed and realised outside England. Some commentators argue that the Conservative party now views itself as a de facto English national party and that the United Kingdom Independence Party is slowly morphing into the England Independence Party. However, both parties retain strong Anglo-British identities and continue to defend the principle of the Union for now.

Politicising England?

One of the defining features of British identity politics has been an apparent reluctance of either of the two main Unionist political parties to explicitly play the 'English card' in the pursuit of electoral gain. Indeed, Labour and the Conservatives avoided serious engagement with English constitutional issues during the Scottish independence referendum, instead stressing their respective unionist credentials. The Conservatives have, though, increasingly sought to politicise the perceived partiality and unfairness to England of Labour's constitutional reform programme, particularly the apparent refusal to address the 'West Lothian Question'. Since 2001, successive Conservative general election manifestoes have promised to introduce 'new rules' to ensure that legislation referring specifically to England (or to England and Wales) could not be enacted without the consent of MPs representing constituencies of those countries. This bold statement of intent suggested a desire to frame and enact English policy matters exclusively through the reorganisation of Westminster to function more explicitly as an English national as well as a UK state parliament.

This Conservative election pledge proved malleable, however, once the party returned to government. It was swiftly diluted within the 2010 Coalition Agreement to a promise to set up a commission to consider the 'West Lothian Question'. The commission, chaired by Sir William McKay, was established in January 2012 and reported back to the Coalition government in March 2013. It proposed a modest range of procedural changes to enhance scrutiny and voting powers to establish the legislative consent of MPs representing English (or English and Welsh) constituencies for legislation that relates exclusively to England (or England and Wales) within Westminster. However, non-English MPs would still be allowed to vote on such legislation and a majority within the House of Commons could still overrule a majority of English MPs, though in full knowledge that this might provoke negative political, media and public reaction in England.

The Coalition government chose not to formally respond to the McKay Commission, thus breaking its own promise to do so by the end of 2013. This lapse revealed differences between the Liberal Democrats, who supported the implementation of the McKay Commission proposals, and the Conservatives, who sought to 'strengthen' them. In the wake of the Scottish independence referendum, it became clear that the Conservatives were keen to establish a full veto for English (or, where applicable, English and Welsh) MPs on relevant bills and revise the remit of the House of Commons Speaker to arbitrate on the territorial jurisdiction of bills, or sections therein. After their 2015 general election victory, the Conservatives quickly voted their version of EVEL through Westminster in October 2015. It was first applied to legislation in January 2016, in the face of the united opposition of Labour, the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, Plaid Cymru and the Democratic Unionist Party.

The Conservative 2015 general election manifesto stated that the introduction of EVEL would 'maintain the integrity' of the UK Parliament by ensuring a 'stable constitution'. But although EVEL has garnered widespread support across the party, some party grandees, such as Bill Cash and Edward Leigh, have expressed concerns about the potentially deleterious impact of EVEL on Westminster politics and the Union more widely, noting it could create two or even three tiers of MPs in an increasingly Anglicised Westminster while also compromising the political neutrality of the Speaker. It is less clear, though, whether the

Conservatives view the introduction of EVEL as a definitive answer to the Westminster 'English Question' or merely the beginning of a more radical phase of constitutional reform. Some Conservative English nationalists, such as John Redwood, clearly see EVEL as only a partial step towards their ultimate objective of establishing an English parliament. Finally, there is uncertainty as to whether the Conservatives view EVEL as a way to address the national English Question or as a means to gain electoral dominance within England irrespective of the party in government.

Such tensions will likely provide opportunities for those seeking to ignite territorially framed political conflict both in Westminster and elsewhere. In particular, the application of EVEL raises questions about the extent to which policy 'spillover', whereby decisions taken relating to one national unit of the UK may have consequential effects in others in terms of tax and spending, could instigate conflict within and between political parties. Indeed, the Scottish National Party cited the introduction of EVEL as a key driver in the decision to break their abstention on voting on matters in Westminster only affecting England and Wales, with SNP MPs now voting on all bills which they believe will have a financial impact on Scotland. The failure of the Conservatives to establish a Devolution Committee within the House of Commons to assess potential cross-border implications of parliamentary bills, as recommended by the McKay Commission, will likely mean that territorial politics will increasingly influence the tone and tenor of political debate in Westminster.

The Conservatives' publication of an 'English manifesto' during the 2015 UK general election indicated that the party was keen to engage on national terms with the English electorate. But it merely highlighted the half-hearted nature of Union-wide political parties seeking to engage separately with voters in England, as most of the policies outlined were directly derived with little or no modification from the Conservatives' UK manifesto. Moreover, policy plans were presented within regional frameworks that did not consistently correlate with many existing or emergent polities, and the manifesto concluded by outlining the benefits for Britain, not England.

The introduction of EVEL has, though, proven even more challenging for Labour, highlighting the extent to which the party has found itself out-flanked by the Conservatives in reforming England's constitutional architecture. Labour's defeat in the 2010 general election encouraged calls from leading figures within the party for the new party leader, Ed Miliband, not only to address constitutional reform of England but also to embrace a more strident English national identity. This was in part tactical, with some such as Jon Cruddas and Maurice Glasman arguing that Labour's electoral fortunes in the South-East of England could be rejuvenated through a distinctively English merger of conservatism and socialism. It also indicated a growing willingness within the party to discuss the resonance of England as a political community.[8] Miliband's interest in the politics of English identity quickly waned, though, and the party fought the 2015 general election on an ambiguous and ill-defined 'one nation' platform which promised to establish an all-party 'constitutional convention' to consider the McKay Commission proposals on EVEL and other options.

Leading party figures have consistently opposed the introduction of the Conservative variant of EVEL, interpreting its implementation as a politically orchestrated attempt to neuter their party in England with little regard to the future of the Union. Instead Labour has argued that England needs a strong voice in parliament, but not a veto. The party still, however, appears unable or unwilling to establish a fixed position on questions relating to the governance of England, with leading figures within the party divided on whether the 'English Question' can be answered via reform of Westminster or through the formation of an English parliament. As such, Labour's engagement with the 'politics of England' has tended to focus on issues of identity rather than constitutional reform, though this approach has merely highlighted further differences within the party.

The resignation of Ed Miliband as party leader has, however, energised debates about English identity in the party. In seeking to explain the 2015 general election defeat, Cruddas criticised Labour's leadership for being timid, arrogant and reluctant to

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devolve power within England. This cautiousness had, he claimed, allowed the Conservatives to implement EVEL and appropriate the English regional devolution agenda. Former Labour MP John Denham spoke for many holding this view, noting the party needed to 'embrace both the new localism and a distinct, autonomous and democratic English Labour'.[9]

During the subsequent party leadership election, an open letter sent to each of the leadership candidates by a group of English MPs and council leaders asking them for their views on constitutional reform once again revealed a lack of agreement on reform of England's governance within the party.[10] The letter also sought their views on the creation of an English Labour party. The responses from the leadership candidates highlighted further divisions between those who viewed a separate English party as essential to the revival of Labour's electoral fortunes in England and others who saw it as compromising the party's pan-Britannic logic and appeal. Notably, the eventual winner of the leadership election, Jeremy Corbyn, appeared at first to support, but then to reject, the proposal.

The extent of confusion regarding potential reform of the party was underlined when Jon Cruddas somewhat prematurely declared during the leadership campaign that the formation of English Labour was 'imminent', much to the surprise of many within the party. It is unclear, however, what, beyond recalibrating the identity (or identities) of the party, the perceived purpose and potential impact of an English Labour party would be, particularly the redefinition of organisational relationships with its Scottish and Welsh Labour counterparts. The Westminster-based UK Labour party might convert into English Labour or a new national party might be established; the new party might form a federal or confederal relationship with Scottish and Welsh Labour. Such dilemmas raise further questions about coherence of policy-making and remit of party leaderships which could potentially undermine Labour's overarching multinational fabric.

It appears somewhat paradoxical for the party which has historically dictated the agenda on devolution both to and within England to be failing to engage with either of the 'English Questions'. In the wake of the losses in the 2004 North-East referendum and the 2010 general election, Labour failed to (re)build a narrative able to address issues of governance across England while also finding a distinctive 'English voice'. Labour has instead sought to criticise Conservative English constitutional initiatives, but without offering distinctive alternative policies.

EVEL is likely to bring some much-needed clarity to English national policy-making while also refining further party political vernacular of England. However, EVEL has also created new challenges to the political authority and identity of both the main Westminster-based Unionist parties. Moreover, the contested and porous nature of what might be deemed England-only legislation will likely make it difficult for political parties to frame manifesto pledges and policies in discretely English national terms. EVEL in its current form is thus unlikely to fundamentally nationalise electoral politics in England. Moreover, as we shall discuss in the next section, regional devolution within England has raised pertinent questions about the nationalisation of English party politics.

The origins of 'new English regionalism'

Historically, the UK state has encouraged a diverse proliferation of sub-national regional and local spatial frameworks in England, including historic counties, metropolitan and non-metropolitan boroughs and districts, unitary authorities and city-regions. They are asymmetrical in terms of their territorial expanse, economic development, population density and composition, cultural identities, and political organisation. Conversely, an enduring political and public attachment to the principle (if not the reality) of egalitarian national citizenship has proven a significant brake on postwar English regionalism. Uncertainties as to the extent to which reform should seek to promote equality or asymmetry between regions and localities have also deterred significant devolution in England. Moreover, attempts to significantly rebalance centre–periphery power relations in England have been compromised by a

reluctance by UK state-level actors and institutions to relinquish their authority.

Attempts to create regional infrastructure or representative bodies in England have thus proven sporadic but have revealed long-standing party differences between the Conservatives and Labour. The Labour governments of Harold Wilson (1964–1970) and Tony Blair (1997–2007) both sought to develop regional economic and democratic infrastructure. These were limited in their scope and success, lacking significant political or public support, and were quickly dismantled by subsequent Conservative governments. The received view of many politicians, academics and commentators after 2004 has been that the English public have little interest in regionalism, and lack strong regional identities that could underpin and sustain regional polities and associated forms of citizenship. Interestingly, as Joanie Willett and Arianna Giovannini note in their respective articles in this volume, both Labour and the Conservatives have regularly drawn on the 2004 referendum to dismiss the territorial identity dimension of English regional devolution without acknowledging the possibility that the North-East electorate rejected a poorly designed institution which lacked sufficient powers, or that there were stronger regional identity-driven opportunities in Yorkshire and Cornwall.

Research assessing the emergence of England as a political national community, such as the FoE and British Social Attitudes surveys, appears to confirm this lack of popular support for English regionalism. However, these studies have not chosen to test the strength and potential politicisation of regional identities in England when compared to English and British identities. Nor have they acknowledged complexity and diversity in how the public understand and frame territorial affiliations. This noted, other research suggests that local and regional attachments resonate strongly with many people when compared with sub-state English national or state-wide British counterparts. Moreover, there is nearly as much support for local or regional institutions to have more influence over governance in England as there is for national proposals such as an English parliament or reformed Westminster.[11]

English regionalism has been traditionally associated by many Conservatives with an ideologically infused desire to 'balkanise' England's national unity. Although the origins of England's regional framework lie in the postwar consensus of the 1940s, contemporary Conservative opposition is a response to the introduction of the English regional constituencies of the European Parliament and Labour's failed attempt to establish regional elected assemblies. England's regions have been considered 'artificial' in nature, lacking in a plausible claim for a distinctive regional identity or culture which is understood as essential in underpinning sub-state forms of citizenship and governance. This lack of 'natural' authenticity has seen the Conservative party frame postwar devolution largely within spatial frameworks which reflect England's local identities and traditions.

This opposition to English regionalism underpinned the Conservative-led Coalition government's urgent dismantling of much of the regional organisational infrastructure established by the outgoing Labour administration upon the Coalition's assuming power in May 2010. With the exception of the London city-region, which had a Conservative mayor, the Conservatives sought to reframe English devolution through the prism of localism—if not always local government. The widespread public rejection of Conservative plans to introduce directly elected 'metro-mayors' to some local authorities in a series of referenda held in 2012, combined with the impact of reductions in local government spending and growing regional economic disparities, has, however, encouraged an apparent *volte-face*.

Since the summer of 2014, two interconnected and overlapping political projects, the so-called 'Northern Powerhouse' and a series of 'city-region deals', have sought to redress regional economic imbalances, devolve more powers to local authorities and enhance political leadership via the introduction of 'metro-mayors'. While the Northern Powerhouse agenda has largely focused on developing transport and other infrastructure across the north of England to stimulate economic activity, the development of a patchwork of amalgamated combined authorities has seen George Osborne

successfully cajole predominantly Labour-dominated local councils—most notably those in Greater Manchester, as Daniel Kenealy discusses in this volume—to collaborate with successive Conservative-led governments to encourage efficiencies in public service planning and delivery.

The party politics of the English 'devolution revolution'

As John Tomaney notes in this volume, the Conservatives' justification for regional devolution in England has been founded on the largely unproven proposition that all combined groups of local authorities can be 'winners' if they follow similar market-led economic growth policies and also reform governance arrangements. The series of asymmetric and bespoke deals by the Conservative government with combined groups of local authorities across England have been quickly signed, underlining a political narrative which seeks to portray the unique and time-sensitive nature of what George Osborne has termed the 'devolution revolution'. These deals have, however, had little consistency in terms of the nature or extent of powers devolved. As a result, English regional devolution has proven largely unplanned, piecemeal and pragmatic, an open-ended process that lacks strategic clarity in terms of the purpose, procedure or extent of the renegotiation of powers within England.

The Conservatives have adopted a contradictory approach to implementing reform 'by consent', stating they will not insist on the configuration or composition of emergent combined authorities or compel any local authority to join one. However, they have stated they will not award many of the extra powers and resources available without the acceptance of a directly elected 'metro-mayor'. A febrile environment has thus emerged whereby local authorities, many of whom have experienced significant reductions in central government grants, have quickly sought to amalgamate to allay fears they might miss out on new sources of funding. The Conservatives have thus been effective—so far—in undermining any potential collective action among local or combined authorities in defining the terms, extent and purpose of regional devolution.

The Conservatives' preference for elite-to-elite negotiations with groups of local authority leaders has been seen as advantageous by both sides in establishing co-operative working relationships which are mutually beneficial. This 'closed shop' approach has, however, highlighted the lack of a democratic mandate underpinning English regional devolution, with scant detail provided by the Conservatives as to the precise nature, extent and end-point of reforms. This has left many national and local elected representatives and citizens uncertain or unaware of regional devolution, or its implications in how local, regional and national forms of governance and citizenship will be remodelled. Moreover, citizen engagement in the design and implementation of regional devolution has been negligible. The few public consultations held by local authorities have been poorly designed, hastily conducted and retrospective in focus, seeking to garner citizens' views on the terms of devolution deals agreed without offering opportunities to revise or reject current or future deals.

Furthermore, the imposition of 'metro-mayors' as a precondition of enhanced devolution deals has raised doubts about the value and purpose of citizen engagement in the mayoral referenda held in 2012. Conservative claims that 'metro-mayors' will enhance regional political capital and governance, encourage greater democratic accountability and instil citizen affiliation with new combined authorities through recognisable personal rather than party-driven leadership are also questionable. George Osborne has drawn heavily on the example of former Greater London mayor Boris Johnson to support the imposition of 'metro-mayors', without elaborating on some of the potential drawbacks of their introduction. While the personality of Johnson as the Mayor of London may well have enhanced the city's international profile, his record in post has proven more uncertain in terms of leadership and performance. Moreover, the febrile and often unpleasant timbre of the 2016 London mayoral elections highlighted the democratic limitations of personality-driven political leadership. Claims that 'metro-mayors'

enhance democratic legitimacy by re-engaging citizens are also disputable, with no mayoral election turnout in London or elsewhere in England yet reaching 50 per cent. The democratic legitimacy of 'metro-mayors' may well solidify but evidence suggests it cannot offer a quick solution to the widespread political disengagement from local democracy.[12]

New combined authority formations led by 'metro-mayors' will undoubtedly alter the relationship between citizens and those elected to represent them at local government level. However, their introduction could have serious implications for established forms of local democracy and citizenship, with civic dislocation exacerbated by a lack of citizen comprehension of increasingly complicated, bespoke and asymmetric formations of local, regional and national governance and representation emerging across England. As more policy- and decision-making is realised at regional rather than local level, it is likely that the role and democratic resonance of 'backbench' local councillors, who have rarely been consulted or involved in the signing of 'devo-deals', will diminish.

In rejecting Labour's approach to regional devolution, the Conservatives have repeatedly stressed that they will not impose 'artificial' regions on England, instead claiming they will defend 'traditional' towns, boroughs, cities and counties. The Conservatives' approach to the spatial recalibration of regional government in England has been defined by a myopic focus on economic growth, with little consideration for the established historical, cultural and political identities underpinning existing forms of sub-state citizenship. Moreover, Conservative plans for regional devolution have—somewhat ironically—encouraged local authorities to coalesce into a range of new spatial arrangements which often lack historical lineage and are thus 'artificial' themselves. As Arianna Giovannini notes in her article in this volume, this has encouraged a plethora of 'bottom-up' pressure groups and political parties which, in part, are driven by a desire to establish territorially based politics which are framed by the historic counties that the Conservatives professed to defend.

Three spatial models of contemporary region-making in England have emerged as a product of the Conservatives' ad hoc approach to regional devolution. In the first model, devolution deals for Cornwall and the 'Greater Lincolnshire' Combined Authority have correlated historic county boundaries with regional governmental structures. The second model is based on the reconfiguration of metropolitan county councils, such as Greater Manchester, which were first established in 1974 by a Conservative government and subsequently abolished in 1986 by Margaret Thatcher, who saw them as recalcitrant, high-spending, ideologically militant and ultimately 'artificial' constructions which undermined historic city and county allegiances. However, the other five metropolitan county councils outside London have not as yet been reconstituted in their original form, and have instead defined a third model of new spatial frameworks that lack any historical or 'traditional' lineage. For example, the Sheffield city-region has at its core the constituent South Yorkshire authorities that combined to form the former metropolitan county council, but with the addition of four local authorities from north Derbyshire and one from Nottinghamshire.

As David Blunkett, Matthew Flinders and Brenton Prosser note in this volume, the 'Citizens' Assembly' research project undertaken in Sheffield has indicated that local and regional identities, often underpinned by a network of civil society and media actors, matter to citizens. However, citizens have not formally been consulted about their preferences in terms of the spatial framing of new regional governance in England. It is clear, though, that the current approach to regional devolution has 'balkanised' some historic counties such as Derbyshire. Beyond the four who have joined the Sheffield city-region, most of Derbyshire's local authorities have sought to amalgamate with their counterparts in Nottinghamshire to form the North Midlands Combined Authority. Four local authorities have either chosen to pursue mergers with other combined authorities or to wait for a better deal.

The terms of membership of many combined authorities are also tiered, with local authorities joining on either a constituent or non-constituent basis. This will mean that

regional forms of citizenship will be hierarchical, in that some citizens will be granted enhanced political and socio-economic rights not available to others within a number of combined authorities. For example, voters in non-constituent local authorities will not be able to participate in mayoral elections. Furthermore, some local authorities have chosen to join two combined authorities. For example, Chesterfield has chosen to join Sheffield city-region as a constituent member and the North Midlands Combined Authority as a non-constituent member. Citizens will be faced with a complex network of local, regional and national political institutions, some of whose spatial boundaries overlap. They will also be expected to decipher which elected representatives are democratically responsible for such services.

The result of the Conservatives' approach to regional devolution is that citizenship rights will become increasingly differentiated and heterogeneous across England. Variation in the devolving of responsibilities for the provision of public services negotiated in the deals so far suggests that citizens in different parts of England will have to adapt to new regional forms of citizenship primarily defined by space and place (which have often been reformatted to fit with new combined authority spatial frameworks). For example, devolution of responsibility for health and social care to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, including the integration of provision, will undoubtedly reform the design and delivery of a wide range of related services to citizens over time when compared to many other parts of England.

The Conservatives' professed pursuit of a 'balanced settlement' for the UK has not, however, seen plans for regional devolution connected to the introduction of EVEL. There has been scant consideration of how the introduction of EVEL might be affected by the asymmetric and bespoke devolution of power to English city-based and county regions and vice versa. Regional devolution will diminish the political remit of some—but possibly not all—English MPs, thus replicating the structural inequalities underpinning the 'West Lothian Question', but this time within England. Put simply, some MPs will find that they are no longer responsible for the provision of some public services within their own constituency, but they will be able to vote on such matters in Westminster in areas that have not yet had such powers devolved. This could lead to tensions within Westminster between English MPs when voting on legislation that does not apply uniformly across England.[13]

The reactive nature of Westminster-based Labour party elites to the Conservatives' regional devolution reforms within England also raises questions about English intra-party relations and authority. Neither the Conservatives nor Labour have given much consideration to the impact of city deals and other devolution packages on local and regional party structures. Ongoing regional devolution has revealed intra-party cleavages within both parties between Westminster and local authority leaders, especially in Northern English metropolitan regions, concerning the design and form of devolution in England. For example, some Yorkshire Conservative MPs have criticised fellow Westminster and local party representatives for seeking to sign city-region deals, thus undermining a potential Yorkshire county-region.

Such tensions have proven more prevalent within the Labour party, though. Many Northern English city-based local authorities are Labour-controlled, but their leaders have proven more than willing to pragmatically negotiate with successive Conservative-led Westminster governments—often without the knowledge or approval of the Labour party leadership or local Westminster MPs. In the wake of signing of the Greater Manchester 'city-deal', Labour-controlled councils were accused by some local MPs of prioritising their own interests above those of the Westminster party. As more powers are devolved to regional combined authorities, the organisation of all mainstream political parties will likely need to be reformed to reflect and respond to emergent polities in terms of policy design, election campaigning and party identity.

Indeed, Labour has so far failed to coherently engage with the party politics of English regionalism. This is in part due to strident differences of opinion within the party. The new party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, initially sought to encourage devolution within England, publishing a report entitled

'Northern Future' during the leadership contest which proclaimed there was a need to 'take back power from our centralised state'. However, the report concluded by reiterating the call for a 'constitutional convention', while criticising the purpose and transparency of the Conservatives' current programme of devolution within England without offering any significant alternative. Since then, Corbyn has rarely returned to the theme of regional devolution, although he has raised the possibility of expanding city-regions to incorporate rural areas. Other leading voices within the party are more pragmatic. Barnsley MP Dan Jarvis has, for example, argued that Labour can only reclaim the devolution agenda if they embrace the Conservative government's focus on the Northern Powerhouse and city deals.[14] Labour appears at present to be as divided on regional devolution within England as it is about devolution to England.

Conclusions

This article has argued that a distinctive but porous and partial 'politics of England' has emerged which has been largely shaped by the two mainstream Unionist political parties, the Conservatives and Labour, who have embarked on constitutional reform in an ad hoc, inconsistent and opportunistic fashion. Both parties have adopted distinctive approaches to answering the national and regional elements of the 'English Question' that reflect the prioritisation of their respective partisan political interests, with little attempt to establish cross-party consensus. Thus while the Conservatives have implemented constitutional reforms, Labour have preferred to focus on identity politics in England. This noted, both parties appear to share an inability or unwillingness to authoritatively state the overarching aims of devolution to and within England.

The 'politics of England' remains compromised by the residual Anglo-Britishness of the Westminster parliament, and also the absence of a nationally focused English civic society or party politics and the asymmetric introduction of regional devolution within England. However, the party political rhetoric and policy-making underpinning a nascent 'politics of England' will likely be further refined as EVEL becomes constitutionally embedded in Westminster. The narrow framing of the 'politics of England' in terms of identity politics and constitutional reform has meant that neither party has yet sought to establish an English political narrative that identifies particularistic national values, attitudes and distributive policies that are distinct from the overarching British counterpart. Furthermore, neither sought to redress the 'democratic deficit' whereby opportunities afforded to citizens outside England to debate and vote on their constitutional futures have not been extended to English citizens.

Current approaches to English constitutional reform are thus likely to create more complexities and tensions in an already fragmented geography of territorial government in England and across the UK. It is clear that both the Conservatives and Labour are struggling to politicise English national identity through engagement with the 'politics of England' in a way that does not undermine their Unionist foundations while also accommodating the various territorial, cultural and political identities within England. Moreover, their shared attachment to the piecemeal and open-ended reforms of the national and regional governance of England have made it difficult to coherently frame or link the various reforms. As such, their engagements with the 'politics of England' are disconnected and partial, failing to offer a comprehensive reform roadmap that seeks to concurrently rebalance territorial governance within England *and* the UK.

Notes

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